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# THE ELEMENTARY SCHOOL TEACHER

APRIL, 1904

## MUST IT BE A LOST ART?

OFTEN these days a protest is heard from the schools and from the homes: "The children cannot read." Even in the high school the teacher of literature echoes the same cry: "The boys and girls cannot read well enough to understand literature;" and we might perhaps venture the question: "Can the teachers read?" Although these protests cannot be taken at their face value, they suggest a misapprehension somewhere. They point either toward some failure in the teaching or to some difference of opinion as to the significance of the terms, and it may be that an attempt to define these terms will open up the subject for discussion. What do we mean by "reading;" by "reading aloud?" When do we expect the average child to read?

To know the words that meet the eye and to be able to speak them is neither reading nor reading aloud. It is to have a valuable tool of whose true use the possessor may know nothing. He may never learn the trick of using it. Reading is imaging, thinking, in response to the stimulus of the written or printed word; it presupposes a mass of experiences on a subject or on related subjects. It focuses all these, and in each person arouses emotions corresponding to the depth and wealth of his emotional nature, his humanity, and his sympathy for all living things; his perception of beauty, and his richness in that power of remaking all thought, imagery, and emotion into a new and marvelous world of his own which passeth beyond experience—his real world, one that endureth forever. Reading is then one of the

most intense acts of the human mind. It is jealously individual, dependent upon the stage of development, and the original power and equipment of the reader; for the book gives to every man according to his measure.

Reading and reading aloud, although closely associated, are two entirely different acts, with two distinctly educational purposes. There is a difference in the thinking done in silent reading and in reading aloud; there is a difference in the motive. To read aloud is to read and at the same time to voice in speech, which is more subtle than song, the message received from the written or printed page. To read aloud is primarily a social act. Not often does one care to read aloud just to himself. The impulse to share with another something which moves one so deeply that it demands a listener is most natural, most human. Reading aloud is one among a number of tests of power to read. Colonel Parker once called oral reading the "lost art"—lost since the time when Homer and the bards recited their verses to those who cared and loved to listen. He had a vision of what it might mean to speak poetry with a clear perception of its meaning and emotional content, and a delicate sense of its rhythm; and he made a passionate demand for practice in this kind of reading for the children. "One good piece of literature always on hand for drill," he used to say, so great that it will not wear out, and of such infinite variety that it will not grow stale with use. It is one of our problems to find out why oral reading is a "lost art." Why out of a class of one hundred teachers can so few interpret a bit of literature? Why should they become wooden and inexpressive and self-conscious the moment a book is put into their hands for this purpose?

How much of this whole condition dates back to the beginnings in the use of books. What is the first association with words, with books? What motive has a child for the use of books; what motive for reading aloud? Is oral language a means of self-expression as well as of communication throughout the school? Is the school organized into a community which gives natural opportunities for the full and free expression of the children? Is the community interest a vital one with both

teachers and pupils? Is self subordinated to the good of the whole? What is the general atmosphere of the school? Is it dominated by fear, cramped by conventionality, tradition, and the personality of the teacher; or is it inspired and uplifted by the spirit of freedom? What appeal is made through nature and literature to the imagination? These are some of the questions that make it impossible to enter upon the problem of oral reading as an educative process without considering the whole organization of the school.

We are not yet emancipated from our inherited idea that reading and books are the only education, and therefore the main business of the first years of school life. No doubt this was once an important function of the school, when the boy and girl had their manual training, their contact with material things, on the farm and in the shops or kitchens; when they handled the plow and the wagon; when cooking and weaving were common acquirements of the average girl; when both boys and girls learned to manage, to love, and to care for the farm animals; when a knowledge of the springtime and harvest, of the ways of trees and birds and flowers, was part of their everyday life—"knowledge never learned at school." Now, the great mass of children are remote from the means of this intimate knowledge. They have no background of experiences for reading, and to spend these early years of a child's life mastering the technique of reading, learning to recognize symbols for which he has no immediate use, is not only a criminal waste of his time, but cuts him off from that touch with the material world for which he has an instinctive craving, and which the modern manual training and domestic science aim to satisfy. It also cuts him off, in a large measure, from the poetry and literature in which his fancy loves to dwell and which is away beyond his reading possibilities. The silly, meaningless repetition of things unutterably dull, "that everybody knows," scraps with which most of the primers and first readers are filled, are a weariness to him—for the child is classic in his taste—and a snare and a delusion to the teacher. These teach the children little or nothing of reading; and the day will surely come when they will cumber the earth no more,

and we shall have, in their stead, rhymes and poems, and delightful wild tales that make the heart beat and convert the vague ideas, longings, and passions of childhood into words that stimulate the desire for books. I have a happy memory of reading a story to a second-grade class one day, when a little girl eagerly asked: "Is that story in that book? Why, our teacher told it to us yesterday!" That child was making a new connection; it was dawning upon her that this book might be a desirable acquaintance. Thereupon we gathered together, and read another story, the children looking over my shoulder, and now and then reading a sentence when they thought they could. I helped them over every hard place, never allowing anything to interrupt the vivid imaging of the class or their happiness in the story.

A further substitute for these barren readers is original stories and poems constructed by the children and teacher out of their own mutual experiences. Here is one of a number of paragraphs by a second-grade teacher on a certain phase of hunter life which the children were studying:

### BEDOUINS.

#### HOW THE COUNTRY LOOKS.

There is a country far away. The sun is bright there. The land is made of sand and gravel and stones. It is hot and dry. But in March there is rain. Then flowers grow. You can see very far. The country looks like a garden. You see a big purple place. It is purple flowers. You see a big red place. It is red tulips and poppies. They grow wild here. You see a low green place. Wild oats and rye and barley grow there. Pools of water shine in the sun. White flowers and purple irises grow in them. You see yellow places. They are wild marigolds. You see other yellow places. They are sand. You see gray places. They are stones and gravel. Little bushes grow there.

The rain stops. The pools dry up. The flowers and grass and bushes die. The country is all dry, hot sand and stones and gravel.

Into some of the new readers and books have been gathered much of the best literature—rhymes, poems, and legends. It requires now that the teacher shall know where to lay hands upon this material, and that she shall have that large experimental knowledge of literature herself, and that insight into child-nature and the laws of child-growth, which will enable her to select that

which is best suited to her special children and their needs at the time.

The parents, because of their point of view, cultivate in the children a false sentiment about reading and a false estimate of its importance which even the wisest teaching cannot counteract. And, alas! we have neither the faith nor the courage to stand for our convictions, and we weakly succumb to the pressure from all sides. The result is that we make too much provision for teaching reading in the primary school—invent too many devices—and somehow the children get hold of our ideal. We center all the children's attention on the word, instead of letting it come naturally out of the work with real things and real experiences, out of the stories and poetry, and out of the demands made by the community life of the school. Learning to recognize and speak words is an integral part of the study of every subject and of the daily life of the children. The spoken word is essential to the children in acquiring ideas and expressing them. Large additions to this language can be made in the first years; at the same time every opportunity for putting the written or printed symbol of this language before the child can be embraced, emphasizing the content and not the form. Conditions which make knowledge of the symbol serviceable can be put about the child. Necessity awakes the desire to know words, and the child's will is then enlisted in mastering the difficulties. The symbol becomes a living thing, and the book, when its hour comes, does not mean a struggle with dry, meaningless signs, but another source of knowledge. There are children whose school experience has trained them to hate books; who are so conscious of the words and their inability to cope with them that the book suggests only a sodden routine, a weary, dreary monotony of uninteresting, straggling lines and angles; a dead wall, black and impassable, against which their enthusiasms beat themselves to death. Will an adequate motive for overcoming difficulties keep the children for the most part unconscious of them? Is an interest in words because of their use a natural interest? Can the interest in the content of the word be so strong that the symbol will be easily remembered? The point is that the process of learning to read

be considered in the light of the habits formed by that process. The way of doing things, and the attitude of mind toward a thing once established by this way, are hard to change. Any method which results in absorption in mere words, in motiveless struggle with words, rivets the attention upon them and tends to establish a habit of being conscious of the form—the symbol; it cultivates a kind of fear which carries over and not only inhibits the impulse to read aloud, but represses and leaves its deadly blight upon the whole expressional life. We make too much of a business of teaching the mechanics of reading. It does seem as if the child himself might be trusted somewhat in this matter. He is in a world of words; they stare him in the face at every move, from every street car and every fence rail; and it is not so hard for him to reason out the necessity for learning to read. With adequate motive he will manage many of the conditions himself, if left free and unincumbered by grown-up devices.

With the majority of children real living interest in reading seems to develop rapidly in the fourth and fifth years of school. If up to this time the background has been well filled in by the constant functioning of words at the time the child felt the greatest pressure for their use, he has a key to the situation, and technical difficulties are mastered under the new impulse with marvelous ease and speed. The danger at this time is often too much reading. Many children, in their first real delight in helping themselves to the riches for which they have hitherto been dependent upon mother or teacher or friend, would rather read than eat or play. Here, without some guidance, there is danger of dissipation, a waste of time and emotion, mental and moral indigestion. Here, too, is a safe and a rare opportunity for the gradual development of definite motive in reading, as well as for making acquaintance with a body of good literature and establishing a permanent love for that which is noble and beautiful. Now, also, a good strong bit of drill is of infinite service in the mastery of words. I recall a fifth-year class studying Tennyson's *Revenge*, and so earnest and enthusiastic, so full of the meaning and spirit of the whole, were they that boys who had great diffi-

culties with words to overcome, and were therefore shy and self-conscious, voluntarily rose to read aloud, stumbling sometimes over the words, to be sure, but carried over their difficulties by the burning desire to express what they saw and felt. In passing, I may add that the teacher read this poem to the children, and so presented it at first as an artistic unit. The child's motive for reading aloud should be constantly emphasized. He reads aloud to tell something to someone. That someone is right there to be spoken to, and must be made to hear and understand. If this once penetrates the consciousness, it has a wonderfully vivifying effect upon his reading. It clarifies his thought, and reacts to intensify his speech and modulate his voice. It is the surest means of making him forget himself in the thing he is doing. Impersonations and dramatic dialogue, which call for a revelation of character in voice, speech, and action, react upon thought and expression in much the same way.

Free intercourse in the schoolroom, exchange of ideas on subjects of common interest, when each feels that he personally is responsible for the conduct and welfare of the whole, establishes habits of self-expression, of unconsciousness of self, and paves the way for the more sustained and more complex self-expression demanded by reading aloud.

The teacher's attitude and personality, the way she does things, and her motive in doing, affect expression beyond calculation. She can, by very force of what she is, create an atmosphere in which initiative is impossible. She can make inhibition the habit, and repression the law, of the school, and keep the children in bondage to that law; or she can lift them into the light and law of liberty and of happiness in activity. She can systematically cultivate fear and self-consciousness and deceit; or she can inspire confidence and naturalness and genuineness. She can, through the silent working of her own motive and ideals, train into selfish love of effect and show, or into unselfish joy in giving pleasure to others.

Habits of self-expression can also be cultivated through story-telling, recitation of verse and the drama. In the "maddening maze" of new and wonderful things introduced into school



life, the old-fashioned "Friday afternoon," when the boys and girls "spoke pieces," has disappeared. Is there any substitute for this effective, if crude, way which will satisfy the dramatic and oratorical instinct, and at the same time lay a foundation for that power in speech which stirs the blood and inspires to far-reaching action? The morning exercises, the great race festivals, the national holidays and anniversaries now observed in many schools, if rightly treated, lead not only to an appreciation of the unity of the race in thought and feeling, the significance of history, the force and power of personal character in life, but, because of the emotional appeal they make and the place they occupy in the social organism, are ideal opportunities for training in dramatic speech. They give a motive for the interpretation of literature. Here is a natural place for training within the school; and such training, followed up through the years, will cultivate in each self-control, clearness, directness, and his measure of freedom and effectiveness in speech before an audience.

Just at present too strong a demand cannot be made for poetry in the schools. Every child is more or less responsive to the beauty of rhythm and the music of speech. They make an irresistible appeal to his emotions, and through them such enlightenment comes that he can take in a whole body of poetry, if wisely selected and presented; not children's poetry alone, which is not so abundant, but great literature which interprets the large permanent things of nature— day and night, the wind, the clouds, the sun and moon, and the ever-changing drama of the child's own life. These are the real things to the child, as they are the real, eternal things to us; and he finds intense joy in hearing and repeating poetry that voices his feelings. "The true realism, always and everywhere, is that of the poets: to find out where joy resided and to give it a voice far beyond singing. For to miss the joy is to miss everything," says Stevenson. Are we in danger of missing everything, or worse—of being instrumental in causing the children to miss it, by holding them to the observation of hard, external facts? Such work is half-work; these facts should appeal to all sides of the child-nature—love of beauty, freedom, life—and lead into that personal experience

which culminates in expression. The one who observes may copy, imitate, mimic the external form of tree, lake, landscape, picture, poem; but he cannot express, because these have not entered into his heart, stirred his emotions, stimulated his imagination, rendered up unto him their hidden meanings, the eternal realities of which they are the symbol. They have not so filled him with the joy of their beauty that his being overflows into original poetic expression. Why can the field excursion and the delight of the children in largeness, grandeur, and beauty not find some such expression? The natural primitive abandonment to that voice in nature which speaks to the imagination would climax in rhythmical, childlike cadences that deliver and free from the stress of emotion—broken, exclamatory utterances, full of repetition, but poetic in feeling and form; melodious with the songs of birds, and the running waters, and with the sounds of the waves; passionate with the angers and fears, or savage with the cruel tricky humor, of childhood; mysterious with the wonder and awe of the child-heart—things that run of themselves into poetic form. Primitive peoples as well as children delight in such expression of their joys and woes. Listen to this verse from an old Greenland song, found in *The Beginnings of Art*, which Grosse calls “a lyrical glorification of one of nature’s spectacles—the hovering of the clouds around a mountain top”:

The great Koonak mountain in the south, over there —  
 I see it;  
 The great Koonak mountain in the south, over there —  
 I am looking at it;  
 The bright shining in the south, over there —  
 I admire it;  
 The other side of Koonak —  
 It stretches out  
 That which Koonak  
 Seaward incloses.  
 See how they [the clouds] in the south  
 Move and change;  
 See how in the south  
 They beautify one another;  
 While it [the mountain top] toward the sea  
 Is veiled — by changing clouds — veiled toward the sea,  
 Beautifying one another.

In the original a rhythmic refrain is attached to each verse.

Kenneth Grahme's boy in *The Golden Age* says, when let loose alone for a day with nature:

The passion and call of the divine morning were high in my blood. Earth to earth! That was the frank note, the joyous summons of the day. I ran sideways, shouting; I dug my heels into the squelching soil; I splashed diamond showers from puddles with a stick; I hurled clods skyward at random, and presently I found myself singing. The words were mere nonsense — irresponsible babble; the tune was an improvisation, a weary, unrhythmic<sup>1</sup> thing of rise and fall: and yet it seemed to me a genuine utterance, and just at that moment the one thing fitting and right and perfect.

"To a child," Mrs. McClintock says, "a rhyme that he has made is a jewel, a treasure. The mildest or crudest little figure of speech that he himself has devised is to him a genuine purple patch set in his little theme." The attempt to embody in æsthetic form his own feelings will surely open his heart and tune his ear to the beauty of language, charm of rhythm, and musical cadences that distinguish the poet's fuller expression of things that cannot be said in any other way.

The child has a feeling, too, for the magic of nature. He has the inner vision that transforms the common and the transient. He dwells in a land peopled with gods and heroes, giants and fairies, where everything, even his playthings, is alive or may come alive; myths, folk-lore, and legends of the old peoples, which have been the inspiration of the greatest poetry, give language, form, and color to his own imaginations. Bringing children's minds into close, simple touch with noble literature, that deals with elemental things in thought and action — for the great literature embodies the child's conception and is for all ages — is the vital thing. A taste is formed which forever excludes that which is ignoble; high ideals of life — the beauty of its relations, of the immortality of love, truth, honor — are suggested; the horizon is widened by sympathy, and the imagination so touched that it translates into terms of beauty all life, all love, and all death. It is the narrow, hard view which makes the acquiring of knowledge the whole of education; the frantic push

<sup>1</sup> It is a question whether or not the boy's song could have been unrhythmic, under these circumstances.

and frenzy of the haste to be rich in facts, that crowds poetry out of the elementary school and the high school. And, alas! the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, too often destroys the taste for the fruit of the Tree of Life. Does not this dryness and bareness persist, blinding the eyes, deafening the ears, deadening the heart, and leaving little to express that demands any depth or beauty of voice or speech?

In the high school, where the emotional life is boundless, dramatic literature, experienced in expression, may intelligently transform the emotions into beauty, and bring under the dominion of the intellect and will, through speech and voice, the most intense passions. Such expressions have at this stage, as Aristotle said, a "cleansing and purifying effect."

What service literature renders in education depends upon the literature chosen, the way of presenting it, and the outcome in expression. Large and rare literary culture and experience in life have been directed toward the selection of that best suited to the high-school students; but, except in a few instances, little of either has been directed toward training in the vocal interpretation of literature. Not long ago a young high-school girl answered the question, "Why do we not have training in reading aloud and in public speaking in the high school?" by saying: "The colleges do not require it for entrance, and we have no time for anything not required." Literature is full of life and full of echoes from outside the limited life each knows. The boy and girl at this time are susceptible to social influences. The social life is just coming strongly into consciousness, and literature is a key to its significance. To study literature is something more than talking about it—sitting outside of it, discussing and dissecting it, or speaking the words to give the intellectual significance of the text. It is to delight in the sound of it, to respond to its music, to think and feel with its heroes, to live, to suffer, to enjoy with them, and thus get an imaginative realization of the values and meanings of life, and the capacity for human sympathy, friendship, and love. The effort to express all this through the voice is most natural. It is another mode of study. One day I heard a boy, as he moved about his room, reciting, with fine

appreciation of the rhythm and emotion, and a pretty clear conception of the meaning, a beautiful poem which was a part of his English work. He was "letting himself out" and enjoying it. "My!" said he, as he finished; "what would the teacher *do* if I read in class like that? Yet I should never know the meaning if I did not read it in that way." "How do you read in class?" I asked. "Oh! we do not read often, and when we do, we just say the words right along. I must write these verses tomorrow from memory." It is said that Maria Edgeworth once was reciting over and over the stanza beginning "The curfew tolls the knell of parting day," when her brother interrupted with: "What are you saying that over for? You don't know what it means." "Because I like the way it sounds," said she. "Well, you won't like it when you study it at school, and the teacher asks you, 'What's the curfew? What's a knell? What's parting day?'" Do not these little incidents reveal a common experience, and at the same time suggest a possibility of what might be done by the teacher of literature? Why not let the children get a bit of joy out of the literature? Why spoil a fine thing forever by so much attention to detail? Words have their only true meaning when incorporated in some literary form, and it is a fine opportunity to lay up a store. But why take them out of their setting and hold them up to be peeked at? Stress cannot be laid upon analysis, meaning of words, or forms; that sort of study comes later. Real interest will prompt the study of words necessary to the whole, and the children themselves will initiate such study. For the literature appeals as a whole. The boy has certain experiences which make it possible for him to take it in as an artistic unit, and any delay is deadly; it scatters attention, and dissipates the emotion which might have carried him over many of the difficulties of technique. It is fatal to the expression of what he does understand and feel, and which should have come when the emotion was at its height, reacting to clarify his images, to make them vivid and strong, and to develop freedom, naturalness, and responsiveness in voice and speech, and in the use of the body.

Reading aloud together brings teacher and pupils close to each other, and it would add much of life and motive to the work

if the teacher himself were able to read aloud and interpret in the most effective way the literature studied. His voice, speech, accent, ennobled and purified by the beauty and richness of a large intellectual and deep, varied emotional life, would be the most potent stimulus to free, full, and beautiful expression. He creates, not a model for imitation, but an ideal and a public sentiment. This, too, carries over to haunt the ear, to echo in the soul, to color the life, and to determine in some measure the individual power of expression in later years. This influence, this inspiration, is strong even when the individual has only a vague memory of the words, and even of the literature. The effect is the unforgotten thing.

There need be little anxiety about the final result; for the natural outcome of all study is expression, and the tendency is to make the expression adequate to the thought and emotion. This tendency, constantly stimulated by the conditions of the school, will give to each individual a certain poise, simplicity, and directness in expression. And later on the desire to make expression adequate becomes an impelling motive for the study of the technique of voice and speech which will carry the pupil through many hours of technical drill. Giving every child this training will bring out the shy, self-distrusting child, and will mitigate the evils of self-conceit and self-consciousness that follow when the speaking and reading aloud are done by the few especially gifted ones in a class. Failure to do this daily bit of work with the whole class, postponing it until the precious opportunity for forming the habit of expression is past, is to atrophy through neglect certain parts of the brain, possibly to harden and narrow the moral character, weaken the emotional life, and destroy a taste that may be to the individual the source of great happiness and spiritual uplifting.

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